

More &gt;



# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## Fidel Castro: History Will Absolve Me

by Marisa Lerer

**Date:** 1953

**Author:** Fidel Castro

**Genre:** Speech

## Summary Overview

On October 16, 1953, Fidel Castro delivered his now famous speech *History Will Absolve Me*, while on trial for having led 113 Cuban revolutionaries in an attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26. The site served as the headquarters of the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista's military in the southern region of Cuba and was therefore one of the most important military posts in the country. Castro and his men were fighting to overturn the rule of Batista, who had seized power on March 10, 1952, in a coup d'état. Castro's plan failed, and he and many of his troops were captured by Batista's army and put on trial. Although the Moncada Barracks attack failed, it signaled the beginning of the Cuban Revolution against Batista and brought Castro into the international spotlight. Castro had been educated as a lawyer and was acting as his own attorney when he delivered his *History Will Absolve Me* speech, which was later published in full. Over two hours long, his speech outlined the five laws that encompassed the socioeconomic agrarian reform that Castro's movement wished to implement. *History Will Absolve Me* was less a legal defense than a denunciation of the Batista regime and a proposal for a new government.

Castro initially addressed his speech to the court that was prosecuting him for his role in the Moncada Barracks attacks. Six journalists, including Marta Rojas, were in court and in this instance represented the public. After his trial, Castro transcribed the speech from memory while he served his prison sentence on the Isla de Pinos off the coast of Cuba. Although Marta Rojas authenticated the version presented here, historians are certain that Castro added some ideas and polished others for publication. The composition of *History Will Absolve Me* was a tedious process. Castro wrote fragments of the speech with lemon juice between the lines of letters to his friends and family. When these letters were heated with a clothing iron, the words written in lemon juice would appear. In 1954 the pieces of the speech were compiled, and in the spring of that year, twenty thousand copies were published for distribution. The last words of his speech, "History will absolve me," were transformed into the title of the "little book" of the revolution. It was reprinted in 1958 by the 26th of July Movement, which had based its principles on this text. Today *History Will Absolve Me* is mandatory reading for Cuban students. It is the most cited work in Cuba, and scholars consider it to be one of the principal revolutionary texts of Cuba and Latin America.

## Defining Moment

The major event leading up to Castro's speech was the attack on the Moncada Barracks, located on the southern part of the island in Santiago de Cuba, and the simultaneous attack on Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Barracks in the city of Bayamo. The Moncada Barracks were the second-largest military base in Cuba at the time, and Castro's failed attack on it was the first attempt at armed struggle against the Batista regime and the first battle in the Cuban revolutionary war. Although it was unsuccessful, the assault put Castro on the national stage as the main revolutionary leader in opposition to the corrupt dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Batista ruled Cuba twice. His first presidency was from 1933 to 1944. The second time Batista came to power was through a coup on March 10, 1952, and he then ruled until December 31, 1958. Batista's government became widely unpopular among Cuban citizens because of the regime's corruption, repression, and censorship.

Castro's organization was one of many that sought to oust Batista. In Havana in 1952, soon after Batista's coup, Castro began organizing with student leaders to overthrow the regime. For one year he gathered supplies and weapons and worked with two hundred other members of the Orthodox Party. The Orthodox Party's political platform encompassed the reformation of political corruption, nationalism, social reform, and economic independence. Included in this

### Table of Contents

- Summary Overview
- Defining Moment
- Author Biography
- Document Analysis
- Essential Themes
- Bibliography and Further Reading
- Web Sites

group were Fidel Castro's brother, Raúl, who was second in command; Abel Santamaría, one of the commanders who had served under Fidel Castro during the Moncada Barracks attack; and Santamaría's sister, Haydée. Their objective was to take over the Moncada Barracks and to occupy the Palace of Justice, the Joaquín Castillo Duany Military Hospital, and a radio station. The attack began in the morning on July 26, 1953. One hundred and eleven men and two women fought against seven hundred troops from the Batista military. Castro hoped that the Cuban people would rally in support of his plan and that Batista's army would break ranks and join his forces. However, neither of these plans came to fruition. Castro and his troops were severely outnumbered. Eight of Castro's people were killed during combat, and Batista's troops captured sixty-one others. Francisco Tabernilla, Batista's chief of staff, ordered the torture and execution of the detainees.

Fidel Castro escaped and hid on a farm in the Sierra Maestra range in Santiago Province. One week later Castro turned himself in, after being assured by the Batista government that he would not be tortured or killed. He was held in Boniato, a large prison near Santiago. On August 1, 1953, Castro was imprisoned in the Provincial de Oriente prison, and it was while awaiting trial there that he wrote *History Will Absolve Me*. With help from the imprisoned Castro fighters, other inmates, and the custodian and prison employees, the prisoners were able to maintain an open flow of information to prepare for their defense. Castro and thirty of his men were put on trial between September 21 and October 16, 1953. In the course of his trial, Castro delivered this speech defending his rebellion and asserting his political position.

## Author Biography

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926, in Cuba's Oriente Province to a wealthy sugar plantation owner of Spanish descent. Educated at a Jesuit institution, he began studying law at the University of Havana in 1945. In July 1947 Castro traveled to the Dominican Republic with a group of Cuban students with the aim of starting a coup against the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, who had been in power since 1930. The coup failed, and Castro returned to his studies at the university. It was at this time that he joined the Orthodox Party. In 1948 he was elected president of the Law Students Association, which he represented at a Latin American university students' congress in Colombia. The congress coincided with a civil war breaking out in Colombia, and Castro participated in skirmishes there before returning to Cuba. Castro earned his law degree in October 1950, but he soon abandoned his law practice to engage in revolutionary activities against the dictatorship of Batista.

At the end of his trial for his part in the Moncada Barracks attack, Castro was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. While he was being held at the prison on Isla de Pinos, he continued to plot Batista's overthrow. After having served less than two years, Castro was released in May 1955 under a general amnesty granted by Batista. He went to Mexico to reorganize his revolutionary movement, which took the name 26th of July Movement. In December 1956 Castro and his followers returned to Cuba and were met by Batista's forces. Only about twenty escaped death or capture, Castro among them. Castro and his followers continued to wage a guerrilla war against the Batista government until January 1, 1959, when Castro claimed victory and Batista fled Cuba for the Dominican Republic. Castro became Cuba's prime minister on February 16, 1959, and eventually turned from his ideals of a democratic government to a dictatorship. When, on April 16, 1961, he declared the Cuban Revolution to be Marxist-Leninist, he turned Cuba into the first Socialist state in the Western Hemisphere. Cuba became a close ally of the Soviet Union, thus creating hostile relations with the United States. This conflict led the United States to declare an embargo against Cuba on February 17, 1962. Castro remained in power in Cuba until February 19, 2008, at which time flagging health forced him to formally relinquish the presidency. He died in 2016.

## Historical Document

In terms of struggle, when we talk about people we're talking about the six hundred thousand Cubans without work, who want to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate from their homeland in search of a livelihood; the five hundred thousand farm laborers who live in miserable shacks, who work four months of the year and starve the rest, sharing their misery with their children, who don't have an inch of land to till and whose existence would move any heart not made of stone; the four hundred thousand industrial workers and laborers whose retirement funds have been embezzled, whose benefits are being taken away, whose homes are wretched quarters, whose salaries pass from the hands of the boss to those of the moneylender, whose future is a pay reduction and dismissal, whose life is endless work and whose only rest is the tomb; the one hundred thousand small farmers who live and die working land that is not theirs, looking at it with the sadness of Moses gazing at the promised land, to die without ever owning it, who like feudal serfs have to pay for the use of their parcel

of land by giving up a portion of its produce, who cannot love it, improve it, beautify it nor plant a cedar or an orange tree on it because they never know when a sheriff will come with the rural guard to evict them from it; the thirty thousand teachers and professors who are so devoted, dedicated and so necessary to the better destiny of future generations and who are so badly treated and paid; the twenty thousand small business men weighed down by debts, ruined by the crisis and harangued by a plague of grafting and venal officials; the ten thousand young professional people: doctors, engineers, lawyers, veterinarians, school teachers, dentists, pharmacists, newspapermen, painters, sculptors, etc., who finish school with their degrees anxious to work and full of hope, only to find themselves at a dead end, all doors closed to them, and where no ears hear their clamor or supplication. These are the people, the ones who know misfortune and, therefore, are capable of fighting with limitless courage! To these people whose desperate roads through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayal and false promises, we were not going to say: "We will give you ..." but rather: "Here it is, now fight for it with everything you have, so that liberty and happiness may be yours!"

The five revolutionary laws that would have been proclaimed immediately after the capture of the Moncada Barracks and would have been broadcast to the nation by radio must be included in the indictment. It is possible that Colonel Chaviano may deliberately have destroyed these documents, but even if he has I remember them.

The first revolutionary law would have returned power to the people and proclaimed the 1940 Constitution the Supreme Law of the State until such time as the people should decide to modify or change it. And in order to effect its implementation and punish those who violated it—there being no electoral organization to carry this out—the revolutionary movement, as the circumstantial incarnation of this sovereignty, the only source of legitimate power, would have assumed all the faculties inherent therein, except that of modifying the Constitution itself: in other words, it would have assumed the legislative, executive and judicial powers. ...

The second revolutionary law would give non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of the land to all tenant and subtenant farmers, lessees, share croppers and squatters who hold parcels of five caballerías of land or less, and the State would indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of ten years.

The third revolutionary law would have granted workers and employees the right to share 30% of the profits of all the large industrial, mercantile and mining enterprises, including the sugar mills. The strictly agricultural enterprises would be exempt in consideration of other agrarian laws which would be put into effect.

The fourth revolutionary law would have granted all sugar planters the right to share 55% of sugar production and a minimum quota of forty thousand arrobas for all small tenant farmers who have been established for three years or more.

The fifth revolutionary law would have ordered the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of all their legates and heirs. To implement this, special courts with full powers would gain access to all records of all corporations registered or operating in this country, in order to investigate concealed funds of illegal origin, and to request that foreign governments extradite persons and attach holdings rightfully belonging to the Cuban people. Half of the property recovered would be used to subsidize retirement funds for workers and the other half would be used for hospitals, asylums and charitable organizations. ...

These laws would have been proclaimed immediately. As soon as the upheaval ended and prior to a detailed and far reaching study, they would have been followed by another series of laws and fundamental measures, such as the Agrarian Reform, the Integral Educational Reform, nationalization of the electric power trust and the telephone trust, refund to the people of the illegal and repressive rates these companies have charged, and payment to the treasury of all taxes brazenly evaded in the past.

All these laws and others would be based on the exact compliance of two essential articles of our Constitution: one of them orders the outlawing of large estates, indicating the maximum area of land any one person or entity may own for each type of agricultural enterprise, by adopting measures which would tend to revert the land to the Cubans. The other categorically orders the State to use all means at its disposal to provide employment to all those who lack it and to ensure a decent livelihood to each manual or intellectual laborer. None of these laws can be called unconstitutional. The first popularly elected government would have to respect them, not only because of moral obligations to the nation, but because when people achieve something they have yearned for throughout generations, no force in the world is capable of taking it away again.

The problem of the land, the problem of industrialization, the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment, the problem of education and the problem of the people's health: these are the six problems we would take immediate steps to solve, along with restoration of civil liberties and political democracy.

This exposition may seem cold and theoretical if one does not know the shocking and tragic conditions of the country with regard to these six problems, along with the most humiliating political oppression.

Eighty-five per cent of the small farmers in Cuba pay rent and live under constant threat of being evicted from the land they till. More than half of our most productive land is in the hands of foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the lands of the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company link the northern and southern coasts. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to till to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerías of cultivable land owned by powerful interests remain uncultivated. If Cuba is above all an agricultural State, if its population is largely rural, if the city depends on these rural areas, if the people from our countryside won our war of independence, if our nation's greatness and prosperity depend on a healthy and vigorous rural population that loves the land and knows how to work it, if this population depends on a State that protects and guides it, then how can the present state of affairs be allowed to continue?

Except for a few food, lumber and textile industries, Cuba continues to be primarily a producer of raw materials. We export sugar to import candy, we export hides to import shoes, we export iron to import plows. ... Everyone agrees with the urgent need to industrialize the nation, that we need steel industries, paper and chemical industries, that we must improve our cattle and grain production, the technology and processing in our food industry in order to defend ourselves against the ruinous competition from Europe in cheese products, condensed milk, liquors and edible oils, and the United States in canned goods; that we need cargo ships; that tourism should be an enormous source of revenue. But the capitalists insist that the workers remain under the yoke. The State sits back with its arms crossed and industrialization can wait forever.

Just as serious or even worse is the housing problem. There are two hundred thousand huts and hovels in Cuba; four hundred thousand families in the countryside and in the cities live cramped in huts and tenements without even the minimum sanitary requirements; two million two hundred thousand of our urban population pay rents which absorb between one fifth and one third of their incomes; and two million eight hundred thousand of our rural and suburban population lack electricity. We have the same situation here: if the State proposes the lowering of rents, landlords threaten to freeze all construction; if the State does not interfere, construction goes on so long as landlords get high rents; otherwise they would not lay a single brick even though the rest of the population had to live totally exposed to the elements. The utilities monopoly is no better; they extend lines as far as it is profitable and beyond that point they don't care if people have to live in darkness for the rest of their lives. The State sits back with its arms crossed and the people have neither homes nor electricity.

Our educational system is perfectly compatible with everything I've just mentioned. Where the peasant doesn't own the land, what need is there for agricultural schools? Where there is no industry, what need is there for technical or vocational schools? Everything follows the same absurd logic; if we don't have one thing we can't have the other. In any small European country there are more than 200 technological and vocational schools; in Cuba only six such schools exist, and their graduates have no jobs for their skills. The little rural schoolhouses are attended by a mere half of the school age children—barefooted, half-naked and undernourished—and frequently the teacher must buy necessary school materials from his own salary. Is this the way to make a nation great?

Only death can liberate one from so much misery. In this respect, however, the State is most helpful—in providing early death for the people. Ninety per cent of the children in the countryside are consumed by parasites which filter through their bare feet from the ground they walk on. Society is moved to compassion when it hears of the kidnapping or murder of one child, but it is indifferent to the mass murder of so many thousands of children who die every year from lack of facilities, agonizing with pain. Their innocent eyes, death already shining in them, seem to look into some vague infinity as if entreating forgiveness for human selfishness, as if asking God to stay His wrath. And when the head of a family works only four months a year, with what can he purchase clothing and medicine for his children? They will grow up with rickets, with not a single good tooth in their mouths by the time they reach thirty; they will have heard ten million speeches and will finally die of misery and deception. Public hospitals, which are always full, accept only patients recommended by some powerful politician who, in return, demands the votes of the unfortunate one and his family so that Cuba may continue forever in the same or worse condition. ...

When you try a defendant for robbery, Honorable Judges, do you ask him how long he has been unemployed? Do you ask him how many children he has, which days of the week he ate and which he didn't, do you investigate his social context at all? You just send him to jail without further thought. But those who burn warehouses and stores to collect insurance do not go to jail, even though a few human beings may have gone up in flames. The insured have money to hire lawyers and bribe judges. You imprison the poor wretch who steals because he is hungry; but none of the hundreds who steal millions from the Government has ever spent a night in jail. You dine with them at the end of the year in some elegant club and they enjoy your respect. In Cuba, when a government official becomes a millionaire overnight and enters the fraternity of the rich, he could very well be greeted with the words of that opulent character out of Balzac—Taillefer—who in his toast to the young heir to an enormous fortune, said: "Gentlemen, let us drink to the power of gold! Mr. Valentine, a millionaire six times over, has just ascended the throne. He is king, can do everything, is above everyone, as all the rich are. Henceforth, equality before the law, established by the Constitution, will be a myth for him; for he will not be subject to laws: the laws will be subject to him. There are no courts nor are there sentences for millionaires."

The nation's future, the solutions to its problems, cannot continue to depend on the selfish interests of a dozen big businessmen nor on the cold calculations of profits that ten or twelve magnates draw up in their air-conditioned offices. The country cannot continue begging on its knees for miracles from a few golden calves, like the Biblical one destroyed by the prophet's fury. Golden calves cannot perform miracles of any kind. The problems of the Republic can be solved only if we dedicate ourselves to fight for it with the same energy, honesty and patriotism our liberators had when they founded it. Statesmen like Carlos Saladrigas, whose statesmanship consists of preserving the status quo and mouthing phrases like "absolute freedom of enterprise," "guarantees to investment capital" and "law of supply and demand," will not solve these problems. Those ministers can chat away in a Fifth Avenue mansion until not even the dust of the bones of those whose problems require immediate solution remains. In this present-day world, social problems are not solved by spontaneous generation.

A revolutionary government backed by the people and with the respect of the nation, after cleansing the different institutions of all venal and corrupt officials, would proceed immediately to the country's industrialization, mobilizing all inactive capital, currently estimated at about 1.5 billion pesos, through the National Bank and the Agricultural and Industrial Development Bank, and submitting this mammoth task to experts and men of absolute competence totally removed from all political machines for study, direction, planning and realization.

After settling the one hundred thousand small farmers as owners on the land which they previously rented, a revolutionary government would immediately proceed to settle the land problem. First, as set forth in the Constitution, it would establish the maximum amount of land to be held by each type of agricultural enterprise and would acquire the excess acreage by expropriation, recovery of swampland, planting of large nurseries, and reserving of zones for reforestation. Secondly, it would distribute the remaining land among peasant families with priority given to the larger ones, and would promote agricultural cooperatives for communal use of expensive equipment, freezing plants and unified professional technical management of farming and cattle raising. Finally, it would provide resources, equipment, protection and useful guidance to the peasants.

A revolutionary government would solve the housing problem by cutting all rents in half, by providing tax exemptions on homes inhabited by the owners; by tripling taxes on rented homes; by tearing down hovels and replacing them with modern apartment buildings; and by financing housing all over the island on a scale heretofore unheard of, with the criterion that, just as each rural family should possess its own tract of land, each city family should own its own house or apartment. There is plenty of building material and more than enough manpower to make a decent home for every Cuban. But if we continue to wait for the golden calf, a thousand years will have gone by and the problem will remain the same. On the other hand, today possibilities of taking electricity to the most isolated areas on the island are greater than ever. The use of nuclear energy in this field is now a reality and will greatly reduce the cost of producing electricity. ...

Finally, a revolutionary government would undertake the integral reform of the educational system, bringing it into line with the projects just mentioned with the idea of educating those generations which will have the privilege of living in a happier land. Do not forget the words of the Apostle: "A grave mistake is being made in Latin America: in countries that live almost completely from the produce of the land, men are being educated exclusively for urban life and are not trained for farm life." "The happiest country is the one which has best educated its sons, both in the instruction of thought and the direction of their feelings." "An educated country will always be strong and free."...

Cuba could easily provide for a population three times as great as it has now, so there is no excuse for the abject poverty of a single one of its present inhabitants. The markets should be overflowing with produce, pantries should be full, all hands should be working. This is not an inconceivable thought. What is inconceivable is that anyone should go to bed hungry while there is a single inch of unproductive land; that children should die for lack of medical attention; what is inconceivable is that 30% of our farm people cannot write their names and that 99% of them know nothing of Cuba's history. What is inconceivable is that the majority of our rural people are now living in worse circumstances than the Indians Columbus discovered in the fairest land that human eyes had ever seen.

To those who would call me a dreamer, I quote the words of Martí: "A true man does not seek the path where advantage lies, but rather the path where duty lies, and this is the only practical man, whose dream of today will be the law of tomorrow, because he who has looked back on the essential course of history and has seen flaming and bleeding peoples seethe in the cauldron of the ages knows that, without a single exception, the future lies on the side of duty."

Only when we understand that such a high ideal inspired them can we conceive of the heroism of the young men who fell in Santiago. The meager material means at our disposal was all that prevented sure success. When the soldiers were told that Prio had given us a million pesos, they were told this in the regime's attempt to distort the most important fact: the fact that our Movement had no link with past politicians: that this Movement is a new Cuban generation with its own ideas, rising up against tyranny; that this Movement is made up of young people who were barely seven years old when Batista perpetrated the first of his crimes in 1934. The lie about the million pesos could not have been more absurd. If, with less than 20,000 pesos, we armed 165 men and attacked a regiment and a squadron, then with a million pesos we could have armed 8,000 men, to attack 50 regiments and 50 squadrons—and Ugalde Carrillo still would not have found out until Sunday, July 26th, at 5:15 a.m. I assure you that for every man who fought, twenty well trained men were unable to fight for lack of weapons. When

these young men marched along the streets of Havana in the student demonstration of the Martí Centennial, they solidly packed six blocks. If even 200 more men had been able to fight, or we had possessed 20 more hand grenades, perhaps this Honorable Court would have been spared all this inconvenience.

The politicians spend millions buying off consciences, whereas a handful of Cubans who wanted to save their country's honor had to face death barehanded for lack of funds. This shows how the country, to this very day, has been governed not by generous and dedicated men, but by political racketeers, the scum of our public life.

With the greatest pride I tell you that in accordance with our principles we have never asked a politician, past or present, for a penny. Our means were assembled with incomparable sacrifice. For example, Elpidio Sosa, who sold his job and came to me one day with 300 pesos "for the cause"; Fernando Chenard, who sold the photographic equipment with which he earned his living; Pedro Marrero, who contributed several months' salary and who had to be stopped from actually selling the very furniture in his house; Oscar Alcalde, who sold his pharmaceutical laboratory; Jesús Montané, who gave his five years' savings, and so on with many others, each giving the little he had.

One must have great faith in one's country to do such a thing. The memory of these acts of idealism bring me straight to the most bitter chapter of this defense—the price the tyranny made them pay for wanting to free Cuba from oppression and injustice.

Beloved corpses, you that once  
Were the hope of my Homeland,  
Cast upon my forehead  
The dust of your decaying bones!  
Touch my heart with your cold hands!  
Groan at my ears!  
Each of my moans will  
Turn into the tears of one more tyrant!  
Gather around me! Roam about,  
That my soul may receive your spirits  
And give me the horror of the tombs  
For tears are not enough  
When one lives in infamous bondage!

Multiply the crimes of November 27th, 1871 by ten and you will have the monstrous and repulsive crimes of July 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th, 1953, in the province of Oriente. These are still fresh in our memory, but someday when years have passed, when the skies of the nation have cleared once more, when tempers have calmed and fear no longer torments our spirits, then we will begin to see the magnitude of this massacre in all its shocking dimension, and future generations will be struck with horror when they look back on these acts of barbarity unprecedented in our history. But I do not want to become enraged. I need clearness of mind and peace in my heavy heart in order to relate the facts as simply as possible, in no sense dramatizing them, but just as they took place. As a Cuban I am ashamed that heartless men should have perpetrated such unthinkable crimes, dishonoring our nation before the rest of the world.

The tyrant Batista was never a man of scruples. He has never hesitated to tell his people the most outrageous lies. To justify his treacherous coup of March 10th, he concocted stories about a fictitious uprising in the Army, supposedly scheduled to take place in April, and which he "wanted to avert so that the Republic might not be drenched in blood." A ridiculous little tale nobody ever believed! And when he himself did want to drench the Republic in blood, when he wanted to smother in terror and torture the just rebellion of Cuba's youth, who were not willing to be his slaves, then he contrived still more fantastic lies. How little respect one must have for a people when one tries to deceive them so miserably! On the very day of my arrest I publicly assumed the responsibility for our armed movement of July 26th. If there had been an iota of truth in even one of the many statements the Dictator made against our fighters in his speech of July 27th, it would have been enough to undermine the moral impact of my case. Why, then, was I not brought to trial? Why were medical certificates forged? Why did they violate all procedural laws and ignore so scandalously the rulings of the Court? Why were so many things done, things never before seen in a Court of Law, in order to prevent my appearance at all costs? In contrast, I could not begin to tell you all I went through in order to appear. I asked the Court to bring me to trial in accordance with all established principles, and I denounced the underhanded schemes that were afoot to prevent it. I wanted to argue with them face to face. But they did not wish to face me. Who was afraid of the truth, and who was not?

The statements made by the Dictator at Camp Columbia might be considered amusing if they were not so drenched in blood. He claimed we were a group of hirelings and that there were many foreigners among us. He said that the central part of our plan was an attempt to kill him—him, always him. As if the men who attacked the Moncada Barracks could not have killed him and twenty like him if they had approved of such methods. He stated that our attack had been planned by ex-President Prío, and that it had been financed with Prío's money. It has been irrefutably proven that no link whatsoever existed between our Movement and the last regime. He claimed that we had machine guns and hand-grenades. Yet the military technicians have stated right here in this Court that we only had one machine gun and not a single hand-grenade. He said that we had beheaded the sentries. Yet death certificates and

medical reports of all the Army's casualties show not one death caused by the blade. But above all and most important, he said that we stabbed patients at the Military Hospital. Yet the doctors from that hospital—Army doctors—have testified that we never even occupied the building, that no patient was either wounded or killed by us, and that the hospital lost only one employee, a janitor, who imprudently stuck his head out of an open window. ...

What a great sense of honor those modest Army technicians and professionals had, who did not distort the facts before the Court, but gave their reports adhering to the strictest truth! These surely are soldiers who honor their uniform; these, surely, are men! Neither a real soldier nor a true man can degrade his code of honor with lies and crime. I know that many of the soldiers are indignant at the barbaric assassinations perpetrated. I know that they feel repugnance and shame at the smell of homicidal blood that impregnates every stone of Moncada Barracks....

I know that imprisonment will be harder for me than it has ever been for anyone, filled with cowardly threats and hideous cruelty. But I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of 70 of my comrades. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.

## Glossary

**Apostle:** a reference to José Martí, known as the “apostle of independence”

**arrobas:** measures of weight (1 arroba = 11.3 kilograms, or about 25 pounds)

**caballería:** measure of land used in Spanish-speaking countries; in Cuba, 33.2 acres

**ex-president Prio:** Carlos Prio Socarrás, who in 1952 was deposed as president of Cuba by Fulgencio Batista in a military coup

**Martí:** the Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí, hero of Cuban independence at the turn of the twentieth century

**rickets:** a nutritional deficiency disease that results in bone deformations in children

**Ugaldé Carrillo:** colonel in Batista's Military Intelligence Service who nearly uncovered Castro's plans to storm the Moncada Barracks

... **the young men who fell in Santiago:** a reference to Castro's men who died at Moncada

## Document Analysis

On October 16, 1953, Fidel Castro made his more than two-hour-long *History Will Absolve Me* speech in his own defense in court in Cuba. Castro begins with an outline of the events leading up to the attack on the Moncada Barracks. He denounces the authorities for attempting to pretend that he was too sick to appear in court. In his speech, Castro analyzes the factors that led to the failure of the Moncada Barracks attack. Although he accepts full responsibility for his acts and admits that the attack was a military failure, he proclaims the attack to be a political victory for the Cuban people. He announces that there is a new popular armed struggle for Cuban independence against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. Castro maintains an anti-imperialist tone throughout his argument and outlines how he plans to transform Cuban society.

In his speech Castro describes the difficult social and economic climate created by the Batista regime in Cuba. Unemployment was the most pressing social problem in Cuba at this time. In 1953 the number of out-of-work Cubans reached six hundred thousand, and only 51.5 percent of the working-age population was employed. The government under Batista embezzled the retirement funds of the elderly and used the money for the regime's own gain. In addition, many Cuban farmers did not own the land that they worked and therefore were also impoverished. Speaking of these farmers, Castro refers to the tyranny of the Rural Guard, which the Cuban government had established in 1902 to protect the countryside; the Rural Guard soon became an arm of the large plantations primarily owned by U.S. citizens, and it repressed the rural population in an effort to keep Cuban citizens from owning their own land. Along with land distribution issues, the quality and accessibility of education were major concerns of the day. Hundreds of thousands of Cuban citizens in 1953 were illiterate, and six hundred thousand children did not attend school. There were ten thousand out-of-work teachers, and many recent Cuban college graduates were forced to take jobs that had nothing to do with their degrees.

The five revolutionary laws sought to solve Cuba's economic and social crisis. Castro wrote them before the Moncada Barracks attack. Had the attack been successful and had Castro's forces taken over the radio station, the laws would have been broadcast for the Cuban public to hear. Castro suggests that Colonel Alberto R. del Río Chaviano, the officer who arrested him and his companions, destroyed the papers that had the five revolutionary laws written on them. Some of these laws were put into effect when the revolutionary government gained power in 1959.

The first revolutionary law proposed to return power to the people and to reinstitute the 1940 Cuban Constitution that Batista had revoked in 1952. Castro claims that the revolutionary movement is the only source of legitimate power and that it would take over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the Cuban government. For Castro, a reformation of the judicial branches was imperative, because most of the judges and magistrates had pledged their allegiance to Batista after the coup. The second revolutionary law calls for the redistribution of land to small farmers in order to solve the problem of rural poverty. Castro describes redistributing the land according to *caballerías*, a measurement of land that is often used in Cuba and which is equivalent to 13.43 hectares.

The third revolutionary law would grant laborers the right to a share in the profits of the industrial, mercantile, and mining companies. Castro exempts agriculture because it is covered by the agrarian reform law. The fourth revolutionary law grants all sugar planters the right to share 55 percent of the sugar production in Cuba and establishes a minimum allocation of profits for each sugarcane crop farmer. Castro describes the allotted sugar production in *arrobas*, a weight measurement used for cane sugar in Cuba. One *arroba* is equivalent to twenty-five pounds, and forty thousand *arrobas* is equivalent to 460 metric tons. Finally, the fifth revolutionary law lays out Castro's plan and terms for recuperating funds that were misappropriated under the Batista government. He proposes to apply these reclaimed finances to workers' retirement and the construction and betterment of social service institutions such as hospitals.

Castro claims that the aforementioned laws would have been put immediately into place had his forces been successful. Castro also emphasizes that the five revolutionary laws are based on the articles of the 1940 Cuban Constitution. For example, Article 90 outlaws large estates, and Article 60 requires that the government provide employment for its citizens.

Castro's economic goals were to convert Cuba from a supplier of raw materials—such as sugarcane and tobacco—to a producer of industrial goods and to return Cuba's land to Cuban ownership. He explains that because of this unequal land distribution, the breadwinner in the Cuban family could work only four months a year during the sugarcane harvest season. Multinational corporations such as the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company owned 25 percent of all Cuban land, much of which they had appropriated through fraud and force.

Castro peppers his speech with literary and biblical references. He alludes to a character in the nineteenth-century French writer Honoré de Balzac's short story "The Fatal Skin" to emphasize the assumption of Batista and his followers that wealth and power places them above constitutional law. Castro quotes the character Taillefer, who says, "Let us drink to the power of gold! Mr. Valentine, a millionaire six times over, has just ascended the throne. He is king, ... is above everyone, as all the rich are." And he goes on to say, "The country cannot continue begging on its knees for miracles from a few golden calves, like the Biblical one destroyed by the prophet's fury." Castro also condemns Carlos Saladrigas, a conservative politician and adviser to Batista. Castro claims that Saladrigas's capitalist economic model is nonfunctioning and asserts that none of Cuba's ruling elite who live on Fifth Avenue, the wealthiest street in Havana, have remedied any of Cuba's social and economic problems.

The next part of Castro's argument outlines the principal methods of the Moncada program. Castro offers solutions for the six socioeconomic problems that he identifies as the most pressing: land distribution, the need for industrialization, the housing problem, unemployment, access to education, and health care reform. Castro states that the solution to the problem of land redistribution begins with economists' and other experts' reevaluation of Cuba's industrial complex and the prompt removal of corrupt officials from office. He wants to provide housing for both rural and urban Cuban citizens and to implement infrastructure development throughout the island. He also plans to redistribute land to one hundred thousand small tenant farmers. His plan includes draining the swamps, replanting the forest, creating agricultural cooperatives, lowering rent prices, constructing new apartment buildings, and using atomic power to bring electricity to the most remote parts of the island. All of this, he asserts, would be accomplished if Cuba would stop investing in the military to defend the island, which Castro is quick to point out does not have any land borders. Castro again refers to the Cuban independence hero Martí, whom he calls the "apostle," in order to bolster support for an education reform plan that encompasses urban and rural education.

Next, Castro justifies the rebels' loss at the Moncada Barracks. He uses their defeat to disprove the accusation that Carlos Prío Socarrás, president of the Republic of Cuba from 1948 until Batista seized power in 1952, supplied Castro and his movement with a million pesos. Castro wanted to be sure to publicly denounce any affiliation that his movement was rumored to have with Prío, whose government was characterized as overly interested in North American economic and political interests as well as being corrupt and anti-Communist. Castro refutes

accusations of an affiliation on the ground that, had his forces been given that much money, they would have had enough supplies and combatants to prevail at Moncada. Castro also brings up the testimony of the ballistic technicians, lieutenants Eusebio Berrio and Heriberto Amador Cruz. Contrary to what Batista had claimed, on October 5, 1953, the lieutenants testified that the weapons used at the Moncada Barracks attacks were not bought by the rebels from foreign countries.

Castro then refers to the Batista regime's crime against those of Castro's fellow combatants who were captured at the Moncada Barracks. He once again quotes Martí in order to associate his revolutionary cause with the hero of Cuba's independence movement. Martí's poem "To My Dead Brothers on November 27th" pays homage to eight Cuban medical students whom the Spanish courts accused of desecrating the tomb of the Spanish journalist Gonzalo de Castañón (d. 1871). They were found guilty after a hurried trial and executed by firing squad on November 27, 1871. This event took place during the Ten Years' War (1868–1878), the first of Cuba's three wars of independence against Spain. Castro declares that the crimes of 1871 (the shooting of the eight medical students) are multiplied by ten on July 26–29, 1953, thus denouncing the murder of his men by Batista's troops.

Castro goes on to counter Batista's assertion that his coup on March 10, 1952, had the aim of stopping a planned coup by President Prío. Batista maintained that Prío was planning his own coup in April 1952 in order to thwart a win by the Orthodox Party in the general elections scheduled to take place in June of that year. There is no historical evidence to back up Batista's declaration. Castro goes on to counter the false accusations that Batista made against Castro's troops who participated in the Moncada Barracks attacks. Batista claimed that Castro's men had killed sick patients in the hospital that they took over. Colonel Alberto del Río Chaviano also stated that Castro's people had stabbed three patients in the hospital. However, Edmundo Tamayo Silveiro, the director of the Joaquín Castillo Duany Military Hospital, swore in court that no military personnel were killed by knives or any other sharp weapons during the assault. Castro tries to demonstrate that the soldiers serving under Batista sympathize with the revolutionary cause. He states that the soldiers are also indignant and shamed by the murder of Castro's comrades. Castro ends his speech with the now famous line that is the title of this text, "I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of 70 of my comrades. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me."

## Essential Themes

Castro's speech did not lead to his release. Despite his defense of his actions at the Moncada Barracks and his condemnation of the Batista regime, the judges sentenced him to fifteen years in prison. In the end, he only served one year and seven months. On May 15, 1955, Archbishop Pérez Serrantes secured Castro's release, assuring Batista that Castro was no longer a public threat. Batista granted amnesty to Castro and his colleagues. Castro went into exile in Mexico, where he continued to build support for his revolutionary movement. The date of the Moncada Barracks attack became the name of the revolutionary movement: the 26th of July Movement. In 1956 the 26th of July Movement—which included Fidel and Raúl Castro, Ruz Camilo Cienfuegos, José A. Echeverría, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Frank País, Abel Santamaría, and Huber Matos—launched a full-scale guerilla war against Batista and his supporters, and *History Will Absolve Me* was their manifesto. Castro finally received the support of the people that he had sought during the attack on the Moncada Barracks and led a successful guerilla war against the dictatorship. On January 1, 1959, Castro's forces entered Havana and defeated Batista.

The full impact of *History Will Absolve Me* and the revolutionary laws that were iterated in it were felt in 1959. Castro became prime minister on February 16, 1959. On May 17, 1959, the Cuban revolutionary government instituted the agrarian reform law to appropriate property owned by foreigners and limit property owners from holding more than thirty *caballerías*. The law eradicated the plantations and did away with North American control and exploitation of Cuban land. The fifth revolutionary law was realized in 1959 when the revolutionary government created the Ministry of the Recuperation of Financial Embezzlement. The Cuban state was then able to recuperate more than four hundred million pesos in embezzled funds as well as properties that were owned by people linked to the Batista regime who had become rich through illegal revenues. In August and October 1960, Castro's revolutionary government nationalized both foreign and Cuban private enterprises. Castro also succeeded in implementing universal health care in Cuba as well as free college education.

Although Castro's government was able to institute some of the social, economic, and political measures outlined in *History Will Absolve Me*, many of Castro's original proposals were never executed. For example, Castro was never able to turn Cuba into an industrialized nation and

therefore never broke Cuba's economic dependence on sugar and tobacco crops. Another idiosyncrasy appears in his solution for the six problems facing Cuba. Castro states that Cuba should invest in its people instead of in weapons. As historians are quick to point out, Castro did not comply with his own economic plan; the Soviet Union continually supplied Cuba with weapons in order to maintain a strategic military location close to the United States. Another discrepancy between Castro's plan and his implementation is found in the first revolutionary law, which people initially understood as a reinstatement of the articles of the 1940 constitution mandating regular elections and alternating political parties. However, Castro never set a time frame for the revolutionary forces to relinquish power, and he never restored Cuba to democracy after defeating Batista. Castro held power for forty-nine years; thousands were killed and even more exiled in defiance of his own dictatorship. Yet even more were inspired by his assertions of independence and self-reliance, and his state survived a US embargo that would otherwise have crippled it.

## Bibliography and Further Reading

- 1 Castro, Fidel, Ann Louise Bardach, and Luis Conte Agüero. *The Prison Letters of Fidel Castro*. New York: Nation Books, 2007.
- 2 De la Cova, Antonio Rafael. *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- 3 Sweig, Julia. *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 2002.
- 4 Szulc, Tad. *Fidel: A Critical Portrait*. New York: Morrow, 1986.

## Web Sites

- 5 "Castro Speech Data Base." Latin American Network Information Center. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html> (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>) [accessed February 26, 2017].
- 6 "The Cuban Revolution (1952–1958)." Latin American Studies. Antonio Rafael de la Cova (December 15, 1997) <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuban-revolution.htm> (<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuban-revolution.htm>) [accessed February 26, 2017].
- 7 "Fidel Castro History Archive." Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/> (<https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/>) [accessed February 26, 2017].

## Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Lerer, Marisa. "Fidel Castro: History Will Absolve Me." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> , edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	Lerer, Marisa. (2017). Fidel Castro: History Will Absolve Me. In E. Salem Press (Ed.), <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from <a href="https://online.salempress.com">https://online.salempress.com</a>
CHICAGO Style	Lerer, Marisa. "Fidel Castro: History Will Absolve Me." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. <a href="https://online.salempress.com">https://online.salempress.com</a> .